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ABSTRACT

In order to establish the effects of three different levels of writing lab use on the writing proficiency and attitudes of remedial freshman composition students, three instructional modes were used. Writing lab students spent two hours a week in small group discussions and four hours in the lab, using autotutorial materials. Classroom lecture students attended a large lecture class four hours a week. Lecture-lab students attended the lecture four hours a week and spent two additional hours in the writing lab. Assessment of writing proficiency by means of the Subject A Diagnostic Essay Test included both the larger considerations of composition, such as evidence of critical thinking and organization and development of topic, and the more mechanical aspects of composition writing. The assessment showed no significant difference in student writing proficiency among the groups. However, attitudes of the writing lab group were significantly more favorable toward the Subject A instruction. (Tables of findings and a list of references are included.) (Author/JM)

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A STUDY OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF INDIVIDUALIZED WRITING LAB INSTRUCTION FOR STUDENTS IN REMEDIAL FRESHMAN COMPOSITION

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This study attempts to establish the effects of three different levels of Writing Lab use on the writing proficiency and attitudes of students enrolled in remedial freshman composition at the University of California at Riverside. In the first level, Writing Lab students attended small group discussions focused on techniques for organizing and developing compositions two hours weekly. They also spent four hours each week in the Writing Lab, working individually with Writing Lab counselors and using auto-tutorial materials assigned according to the results of the Subject A Diagnostic Essay. Individually assigned essay topics all dealt with subject matter being learned in concurrent content area classes. Classroom-Lecture students attended a large lecture class four hours weekly, in which lecture and paper assignments focused on the uses of language as a vehicle for communication, and grammar was taught through extensive class discussion and chapters in a programmed text assigned on a non-diagnostic basis. The Lecture-Lab group, which is discussed separately as an addendum because of threats to group comparability, attended the classroom-lecture class as well as spending two additional hours each week in the Writing Lab. Assessment of writing proficiency by means of the Subject A Diagnostic Essay Test included both the "larger considerations of composition", such as evidence of critical thinking and organization and development of topic, and the more mechanical aspects of composition writing. The assessment process suggested that there may be some inadequacies in the present Subject A grading scheme. There was no significant difference in student writing proficiency according to group enrollment. All groups showed significant growth in writing ability. Attitudes of the Writing Lab group were significantly more favorable toward the Subject A instruction. (This study was funded by the University of California $1 Million Fund for Excellence in Undergraduate Education.)

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Recent studies evaluating programs teaching composition skills at the community college and university levels do not always show that improvement in writing ability and related factors results from student participation in these writing programs. (Losak, 9; Bossone, 2; Kates, 8). When statistically significant improvement is found on some criteria, the magnitude of the improvement may be disappointingly small (Cohen, 5). Kates, in a large survey (8), found that most gains after instruction were made by those students in classes that were small in size, with extensive, individualized writing assignments.

Instruction individualized through the use of tutorial support and/or self-instructional materials seems a logical step towards a goal of small classes and extensive individualized assignments, and several studies have explored the effectiveness of variations of

"Writing Lab" approach. These studies generally find that "Writing Labs" supplying auto-tutorial materials or individual tutoring equal (Rakausas, 14; Newcomb, 12; McDonald, 11) or exceed (Otterbein, 13) controls on assessed criteria, or fail to equal controls in some areas of assessment while equaling them in others (Becker, 1; Burne, 4; Sutton and Arnold, 15; Harris, 7). The general success of most efforts at incorporating programmed materials and tutorial support into the framework of English composition teaching, and the reports of favorable attitudes toward such instruction (McDonald, 11; Harris, 7) led to the consideration of a Writing Lab as an adjunct to the program in remedial freshman English at the University of California at Riverside.

Students entering the University of California are required to demonstrate a writing ability adequate for college work by passing the university's "Subject A" requirement. Meeting this requirement demands the ability to write a reasonably well-organized expository essay without major grammatical errors. Forty-five to sixty percent of students entering the university fail to pass the "Diagnostic Essay" indicating this writing ability, and therefore must meet the requirement through the completion of "Introduction to College English", or "Subject A." Student attitude in this course is a great problem. The student receives no credit, must pay an additional $45 fee, and feels stigmatized at being forced to enroll in a remedial course, particularly since most received grades of A and B in high school English. Student writing ability ranges from simply "unformed" writers to those students with extremely severe problems in basic grammar and sentence structure. All these factors contribute to the difficulty of teaching Subject A. This study attempted to provide evaluation of the regular Subject A program

and an additional "Writing Laboratory" program in basic grammar and composition skills.

In Fall, 1974, 59 of the students required to enroll in Subject A at the Riverside campus of the University of California were randomly assigned to two types of instruction, Classroom-Lecture and Writing Lab, each taught by similarly educated and experienced teachers. The Classroom-Lecture Method involved four hours of classroom lecture and discussion weekly in problems in grammar and style, as well as on the organization of essays. Student essay assignments were focused on the style and subject matter of published essays concerned with language and communication, or written on "any topic", as long as the essay was developed in a certain expository mode: argument, explanation, etc. Additional treatment of grammar topics was accomplished through the use of six or more chapter assignments from Helen Mills' Commanding Sentences, a book designed for individual programmed instruction in grammar.

The Writing Lab method involved two hours of small group discussion (15 students) plus four hours of individual work in the Writing Lab. During the class hours, lecture and discussion focused primarily in essay organization and development, with some discussion of style, and almost no discussion of grammar problems. Essay assignments were individually selected with each student, using topics taken from subject matter covered in his other courses. Papers discussing similarities between men and baboons, the philosophical implications of abortion, the functions of the presidency, and the process of photosynthesis were typical. The paper assignments were "relevant", because they were based on topics that were important in other courses, and

because they were the type of papers that would be required of the student in later college work. To ameliorate problems of grammar and style, the students attended the Writing Laboratory four hours each week. During these hours several writing counselors were available to help students develop and refine their assigned papers. Grammar assignments for each student were based on results of the student's original "Diagnostic Essay", wherein various kinds of errors were categorized. Materials varying in difficulty level, topic, and type were organized so that those which might help a student solve a particular grammar problem could be assigned to the degree the diagnostic test indicated was necessary. During his hours in the lab, the student therefore had a "menu" from which to choose his learning activity: he could choose to work on any one of his grammar problems using the individualized, diagnostically assigned auto-tutorial materials, or he could write or revise his assigned paper, asking a writing counselor for advice when he felt it necessary.

The final examination of the course consisted of alternate versions of the essay examinations used on the initial screening. These examinations included a passage by a writer such as Loren Eisely or Aldous Huxley, which the student was to read, and a question on the passage to be developed into an essay by the student. The student had a three-hour period to write a coherent essay on his topic. The papers were coded with numbers and rated "blindly" to prevent any bias in the grading related to the individual student or method. The papers were shuffled to eliminate possible identification of class, method, or pre-post order.

Two independent evaluators trained in the use of the Subject A grading scheme, separately rated each essay on a number of criteria: the number of major grammatical errors, including sentence fragments,

run-together sentences, agreement problems, major verb or part-of-speech misuse, idiom misuse and reference problems; the number of minor grammatical errors, including errors of midification, coordination, subordination, predication, statement, mixed construction, parallel construction, and coherence. Total grade from A to F- was based on the number and type of grammatical errors, and the structure, organization and style of the essay as a whole, using the grading standards of a "non-remedial" Freshman English class. The correlation between the raters was .77 on number of major grammatical errors, .75 on number of minor grammatical errors, and .83 on "grade", indicating moderate agreement on the part of the raters.

Data were submitted to a 2 X 2 repeated measure analysis of variance to determine the effects of treatment categories (Lecture vs. Lab) with respect to testing occasions (Pre vs. Post). This design was employed for evaluation of the effects of the independent variables on three dependent variables: major grammatical errors, minor grammatical errors, and essay "grade". Descriptive indices for the cells of the design are displayed in Table 1. Results of the analyses for the dependent variables are displayed in Table 2.

INSERT TABLE 1

INSERT TABLE 2

For major grammatical errors, minor grammatical errors, and total "grade" on essay there was no statistically significant difference in the mean scores of the Lecture and Lab groups. For major and minor grammatical errors the mean post-test score was less than the mean pre-test score (major: $F=16.88$, $df=1/114$, $p<.001$; minor: $F=16:80$, $df=1/114$, $p<.001$). For the essay grade the mean post-test score was greater than the mean pre-test score ($F=31.96$, df-1/114, p .001). This

indicates that there was significant improvement in scores after instruction in the Subject A course, but that enrollment in a writing lab or lecture group failed to affect scores on the dependent variables. With respect to the magnitude of improvement, the mean number of errors was two less on the post-test than on the pre-test, a 34% improvement. The mean number of minor errors was more than two less on the post test, a 30% improvement. Improvement in mean grade for the essay was from approximately "D" to between a "D+" and a "C-".

To achieve these improvements, the lecture class had included much time devoted to grammatical principles and discussion of grammatical problems. The Writing Lab students spent almost no time in class discussing grammar, instead using the programmed and autotutorial material to develop understanding of grammatical principles. Therefore a statement that the two groups failed to differ in number of major and minor grammatical errors indicates that diagnostically assigned lab teaching of grammar may be as effective as grammar taught by a teacher to a large group in a class setting. The fact that the two groups failed to differ significantly in total "grade" for the essay indicates that two hours of small group discussion, when done in conjunction with individual writing counseling used mainly at the student's discretion, may be as successful in teaching organization, style and "larger considerations of composition" as the four-hour-per-week large-group lecture class.

It was felt that the individual consideration and attention available in the Writing Lab sections might cause the Writing Lab student to develop a more favorable attitude toward the Subject A course. An attitude scale allowed each student to rate the following items on a thirty-point scale (1=excellent, very important, etc.; 30=poor,

unimportant, etc.): the quality of his paper assig-ments, the amount of extra help available to him, the quality of this extra help, the amount of improvement he felt he had made, and the usefulness of his Subject A learnings for other classes. Using the attitude item as a dependent variable, a one-way analysis of variance was employed to determine differences in the mean attitude scores of the Lecture and Lab groups. Due to random assignment, such differences are interpretable as differences in attitude changes. The descriptive indices for the dependent variables and groups are contained in Table 3. Results o. the analysis of variance are displayed in Table 4.

INSERT TABLE 3

INSERT TABLE 4

All seven measures were favorable to the Writing Lab group. Five of the items were quite significantly in favor of the Writing Lab group: quality of teaching ($F=4.66$, $df=1/44$, $p<.05$), amount of extra help available ($F=31.08$, $df=1/44$, $p<.001$), quality of extra help ($F=26.71$, $df=1/44$, $p<.001$), amount of improvement felt ($F=7.53$, $df=1/43$, $p<.01$), usefulness of Subject A learnings for other classes ($F=5.10$, $df=1/40$, $p<.05$). The mean of the Lab group failed to be significantly less than the mean of the Lecture group on the following items: importance of the subject, and quality of paper assignments.

The results of this experiment seem to indicate that the "Writing Lab" method of teaching grammar and composition, as defined in this study, may be as effective in teaching both grammar and usage, and essay structure and organization, as four hours of class lecture on these topics. However, the "Writing Lab" method, which includes two hours of class supplemented by both individually diagnosed and assigned

auto-tutorial grammar materials and individual writing counseling, seems to produce a more favorable attitude toward remedial composition instruction. If attitude toward instruction is seen as a valuable component of a composition program, the Writing Lab may be seen as a valid alternative to classroom lecture instruction in remedial composition.

Table 1
Means and Standard Deviations of Dependent Achievement Variables
Separated by Pre and Post Test and By Group

	Pre-test			Post-test		
	$\bar{X}$	SD	N	$\bar{X}$	SD	N
Major Grammatical Errors*						
Lecture	5.77	2.80	28	3.80	1.95	28
Lab	5.90	3.17	31	3.87	2.27	31
Minor Grammatical Errors*						
Lecture	7.98	3.32	28	5.64	2.89	28
Lab	7.45	3.10	31	5.21	2.80	31
"Grade" on Essay**						
Lecture	5.16	1.72	28	6.48	.88	28
Lab	4.79	1.61	31	6.76	1.93	31

*Actual total errors in essay of approximately 500 words.
**Number corresponds to essay "grade", 1="F-", 7="C-"(needed to pass the course and Subject A requirement,)14+"A".

TABLE 2
Analysis of Variance on Dependent Achievement Variables
Separated by Pre and Post Test and by Group

Source of Variation	ss	df	ms	F	p
Major Grammatical Errors					
Lec-Lab	.32	1	.32	1	ns
Pre-Post	118.00	1	118.00	16.88	<.001
Interaction	.02	1	.02	1	ns
Error	796.85	114	6.99		
Minor Grammatical Errors					
Lec-Lab	6.83	1	6.83	1	ns
Pre-Post	154.45	1	154.45	16.80	<.001
Interaction	.07	1	.07	1	ns
Error	1047.73	114	9.19		
"Grade" on Essay					
Lec-Lab	.08	1	.08	1	ns
Pre-Post	81.39	1	81.39	31.96	<.001
Interaction	3.07	1	3.07	1	ns
Error	290.34	114	2.54		

TABLE 3
Means and Standard Deviations of Dependent Attitude Variables Separated by Group

Attitude Item	$\bar{x}$	sd	n
Quality of Teaching			
Lecture	12.91	5.24	22
Lab	9.21	5.91	24
Importance of the Subject			
Lecture	12.09	6.05	22
Lab	9.37	7.01	24
Quality of Paper Assignments			
Lecture	15.32	7.03	22
Lab	12.45	6.55	24
Amount of Extra Help Available			
Lecture	17.68	7.56	22
Lab	6.20	5.85	24
Quality of Extra Help			
Lecture	15.66	7.97	22
Lab	5.96	4.32	23
Amount of Improvement Felt			
Lecture	12.55	6.84	22
Lab	7.52	5.38	23
Usefulness for Other Classes			
Lecture	18.91	7.25	22
Lab	13.10	9.39	20

TABLE 4
Analysis of Variance on Dependent Attitude Variables Separated by Group

Source of Variation	ss	df	ms	F	p
Quality of Teaching					
Lec-Lab	157.20	1	157.20	4.66	<.05
Error	1483.78	44	33.72		
Importance of the Subject					
Lec-Lab	59.68	1	59.68	1.38	ns
Error	1897.42	44	43.12		
Quality of Paper Assignments					
Lec-Lab	93.88	1	93.88	2.04	ns
Error	2024.73	44	46.02		
Amount of Extra Help Available					
Lec-Lab	1511.01	1	1511.01	31.08	<.001
Error	2139.04	44	48.61		
Quality of Extra Help					
Lec-Lab	1055.62	1	1055.62	26.71	<.001
Error	1699.63	43	39.53		
Amount of Improvement Felt					
Lec-Lab	283.78	1	283.78	7.53	<.01
Error	1621.19	43	37.70		
Usefulness for Other Classes					
Lec-Lab	354.28	1	354.28	5.10	<.05
Error	2776.86	40	69.42		

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